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SUBJECT: INTERNATIONAL VISITOR EXPERIENCE LEADS TO FIRST DAMASCUS
BREAST CANCER WALK

Summary

¶1. [SBU] Pink balloons, ribbons, and posters festooned a high-traffic area of Damascus on Saturday, April 12 for the first-ever "March for Survival." The walk, organized by the Syrian Breast Cancer Society, inspired by the October 2007 International Visitor Program on "Breast Cancer Awareness." Two members of the society participated in the IVP and took part in the Susan B. Komen Race for the Cure in San Diego. One of the IVP alumni told CAO she wanted the Damascus walk "to be as close to the U.S. experience as possible." The event drew 200-250 women and men, media attention, and private/public sector sponsorship. The walk proved the existence of a small but significant space for civil society to operate in Syria. End summary.

International Visitor Inspiration

¶2. [U] Participation in the October 2007 International Visitor Program on "Breast Cancer Awareness" inspired Lamya Hussari and Dr. May Mahayni, two members of the Syrian Breast Cancer Society, to duplicate the American model for successful awareness raising: a walk or march. Using the example of the Susan B. Komen Race for the Cure, the Syrian Breast Cancer Society staged the first "March for Survival" on Saturday, April 12. Between 200-250 people participated in this first of its kind event in Damascus. Participants included a large number of doctors and medical students, both men and women, as well as delegations from the Syrian Red Crescent Society and the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Local media were out in force covering the event.

¶3. [U] The walk received sponsorship from a number of local and international private and public sector institutions, including: Total E&P, MPI (pharmaceutical company), SyriaTel, Syrian Arab Red Crescent, Shami Hospital, Novartis Oncology, Bank Audi, Health World (magazine), Arabesque FM (106.9), Kodak, and Carestream Health. While donations were solicited at the walk, the main goal was awareness rather than fundraising. The government also lent its support. The Deputy Minister of Health, Dr. Mohammad Jamil Al-Owayed, spoke at the finish line about the importance of breast cancer awareness, early detection, and praised the Breast Cancer Society for its work.

Comment: Civil Society in Action

¶4. [SBU] Syrian civil society is constrained in its areas of operation and limits itself largely to government-sanctioned,

apolitical spheres such as healthcare. The Syrian Breast Cancer Society and other nascent non-governmental organizations, notably environmental associations, focus on awareness and consciousness-raising among Syria's youth. While small, the "March for Survival" was notable for the broad participation it attracted and for the organizers' ability to obtain all the necessary permissions as well as high-level government support.

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